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‘BorrowMyDoggy.Com’: Rethinking Peer to Peer Exchange for Genuine Sharing

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Abstract

Through a case study of a pet owner-borrower matching website, used as a contrast to initiatives such as uber and airbnb, this paper aims to re-examine what constitutes genuine sharing in peer to peer collaborative transactions. It argues that aims of public spiritedness and community building through interactions are essential for sustaining peer to peer collaborations. When money is the focal point of exchange, the collaborative relationship is motivated by profit making rather than goals of sustainability, wellbeing or good citizenship. Further, interactions that create completely new kinds of connections within communities, (rather than replacing traditional connections of service or usage of goods with simply cheaper or more accessible ones), are more likely to generate genuine sharing ethos. The chief implication of the case study for other peer to peer programmes is that collaborators need to think carefully of the objectives and means of exchange. Capturing new kinds of productive relationships, which are not overly reliant on the exchange of money, but contribute to community relations and cultural citizenship, may result in genuine exchange.

Epigraph

“Here are my two dogs back home in New Zealand,” the young man showed me his iPhone screen. Two chocolate brown Labradors smiled up at me from a lush green lawn many miles away from Bristol. I could not help smiling back at them. Alex, whom I had invited home, along with his Irish girlfriend Aileen, lived just a few streets away from me in Clifton, Bristol, UK, and this was our very first meeting. Yet, giving small talk a miss, we were sipping tea while swapping stories of childhood, travels around the world, and the friends we have left behind. Every few seconds either Alex or Aileen would pause to pat my pup and say in admiring tones ‘good boy Jazz’. To our mutual enjoyment Jazz would then roll on to his back and invite tickles.

Introduction

Flashback to December 2015 when I was trying to toilet train my new 8 week old puppy; no mean feat when the winter cold breeze bites. I hold on to his lead with numb fingers. Rain soaks us through while Jazz obstinately digs his paws in. I am close to tears.

Nothing in my childhood association with our pet family German shepherds in Kolkata, India, had prepared the adult me for this experience as a first time dog owner in Bristol. Here in cold, wet, lonesome England life with pets was different. A few of my acquaintances had dogs but I did not know them well enough to ask for support or solidarity over the quiet Christmas recess.

Christmas: a time for families or loneliness. I have no extended family in the UK: my husband who works in London during the week and commutes back to Bristol every weekend has no experience with dogs at all. And, I have an 8 year old (albeit dog loving) child to care for as well. Naturally, I could not bother my university colleagues over puppy issues. This was thus a time of isolation; the kind of sequestration in a private world that migrant mothers often experience with their infants. Yet, I live in Bristol, a bustling city; not an isolated patch of English countryside. That too, I live in Clifton, a part of Bristol where dog ownership is exceptionally common. What sets me quite apart from most Clifton pet owners is that not many of them are migrants from elsewhere. Indeed, I am yet to come across any other dog owner who looks like me: a rather harried looking South Asian working mother.

There are then some obvious significant barriers to my setting up a satisfying social relationship in my neighbourhood with my pet. Yet, this paper is an optimistic account of new social links enabled by dog ownership in the past few months as I overcame these barriers. The burning question is how I was able to transform my life in my neighbourhood. The answer is by participating in peer to peer exchange relationships facilitated by technology. Despite the normal academic reservations about sharing personal experiences, I highlight my personal situation in this article, because it raises some critical points about what drives sharing economy relations, and what sustains these for collaborators.

My experience of pet ownership was transformed radically because of an online community of dog lovers I encountered accidentally while searching for puppy care information. This is a website called BorrowMyDoggy.com which connects dog owners with those located nearby who share a love of dogs but are unable to own one in their current life circumstances. People offer to borrow dogs from their owners for a few hours, to walk them or to just enjoy playing with them. What exactly do the collaborators exchange? The exchange is not about a surplus good or a cheaper service as is often the case but about the development of an affective relationship. It is the match between a dog owner's wish to provide his/her dog with a greater social circle and a dog borrower's desire to have a dog as a companion for short periods of time. Thus, 'BorrowMyDoggy' is a new kind of collaborative sharing where the exchange is not outright of money for goods and service but is the development of a mutually constituted collaborative relationship of caring for a pet which one person owns while the other person borrows. This paper analyses this new kind of transaction, how it is supported, and its implications for what we know about the larger 'sharing economy'. I will argue in this paper that the collaborators are not just invested in the immediate transaction of handing over a pet for pet-sitting or walking but in the development of social forms which translate into links to the community. Further, this paper also develops an understanding of the effect of such new forms of affective peer to peer exchanges and how these can contribute to conceptions of community and cultural citizenship. The exchange itself is about greater substantive citizenship and belonging rather than being merely about the intrinsic value of the exchange and this lends it authenticity. Authenticity contributes to robustness and it is this aspect that is a matter of interest for other peer to peer collaborations.

[Background Issues in Sharing Economy Relations](#)

In the initial days of sharing economy ventures these were usually collaborative projects which had been created because of concerns about over consumption in advanced

capitalist economies. Most participants were concerned about the environment and the effects of waste on the environment. As Hamari et al (2015) write collaborative consumption was expected to remedy all kinds of modern societal ills such as hyper-consumption, pollution, and poverty. Positive attitudes for engaging in collaborative consumption help achieve some of these ends.

In the absence of positive attitudes, problems emerged resulting in the relabelling of the sharing economy as the 'gig economy'. This is because, mimicking some free market characteristics, some collaborative ventures reduce regular workers to part time ones who can secure only occasional work (gigs). There are two critical reasons why these problems emerge and both become apparent when we look at the examples of Airbnb and Uber. First, with money exchanging hands transactions became about generating higher profits for the more powerful party in the transactions (Ranchordás 2015). We can call this the profit accumulation problem. The profit accumulation problem has resulted, at least in some instances, in the use of cheaper casual labour and the flouting of or disregard for many regulatory frameworks. Indeed, for some, peer to peer engagement was seen as a way around state regulation. Uber and Airbnb have both become examples of avoidance of regulations (Syed 2016). Second, peer to peer ventures started deeply affecting and even replacing some other established industries where there was better protection for both workers and customers. We can call this the regulation related replacement problem. Some examples of such replacements are of the taxi drivers or of the hospitality industry employees who have lost their full time work status to the more transient yet flexible nature of service offered at Uber or Airbnb.

These are tragic adverse effects particularly in light of the initial intent of sharing economy to counter-act neoliberal market place practices with a certain degree of altruism in the motivation for enterprise (Lamberton and Rose 2012). How can sharing economy

practices avoid these pitfalls of selfish pursuit of profits at the cost of public spiritedness? The first issue (the profit accumulation problem) is about money as a medium of exchange which arises because money has many utilities and can be put to alternate uses (Taussig 1977). Economists express this phenomenon as an exception to the law of marginal utility of goods. Thus while money is useful as an expression of value and as a convenient medium of exchange for complex transactions transcending direct barter, accumulating it in terms of profit is commonplace. Marx's volumes on *The Capital* identify this tendency of accumulating profit as the engine behind capitalism. However, as Sociologist Simmel says, while money is omni-present in all social interactions, it can become an end in itself (Deflem, 2003:69). It is not just the marketplace then where greed takes precedence but also in all forms of social interactions. Simmel calls this the commodification of interactions. Utilising money for its facilitative role without making it of direct importance in an exchange is quite critical for preventing its accumulation from being the focus of a sharing transaction.

The second issue (the regulation related replacement problem) about affecting well established industries is a more complex one. People need to earn to support themselves and if their regular jobs are supplanted by others providing similar services on a peer to peer non-monetary basis there are serious repercussions on their lives. Most of the problems arise when there is lack of adequate regulation or disregarding of regulatory rules. Regulation from a distant body, such as the state, may be unnecessarily complex in transactions based on trust but as the peer to peer relationships facilitated by technology are often among strangers these need to be protected through some sort of regulatory structure. The problem, however, is that it is easy to replicate a state centric regulatory apparatus and stifle creativity instead of catalysing it.

New Approaches in the BorrowMyDoggy.com model

Collaborative relations come in all kinds of forms. Kassan and Orsi have analysed collaborative relations and classified these as existing at various levels (2011). In level 1 are the most genuine spontaneous interactions driven by intimate links in the community. For example, a neighbour gifts some potatoes and receives some apples from the orchard next door. These are propelled by authentic feelings of solidarity but are sporadic and not systematised. Thus, it is not possible to rely on such transactions for any planned activity, such as baking a pie. In level 2, the uncertainty factor is controlled through agreements for sharing and transacting to ensure reliable sharing and borrowing. However, there is usually no general oversight over such agreements. A means of strengthening the agreements is to have a level 3 arrangement in place. By level 3 Kassan and Orsi refer to the building of organizations within the sharing economy. They give the example of a neighborhood group formed for the purpose of sharing cars in the neighborhood. Kassan and Orsi also discuss a level 4 situation which involves building larger-scale infrastructure which generally would require some commitment of resources from the community or local authority/governance. An example of a level 4 scheme is a community-wide bike sharing programs.

As per the Kassan-Orsi classification, BorrowMyDoggy is a level 3 model of peer to peer sharing. There is an organizational structure (the website and staff) to support interactions between individuals. The individuals have an agreement structure (forms allowing consent to walk a dog off lead, for instance). But it is not level 4 as it does not seek to engage local governments or community resources in any manner. The website claims to have over 300,000 registered users in the UK with profiles entered by owners of dogs and their potential borrowers who can be located using distance from local post codes as one of the search criteria. BorrowMyDoggy, albeit in the context of dogs, acts primarily like a dating service by maintaining search engine services for user profiles for other users to

access. The website uses similar language to dating websites. “Create a profile & browse matches. Your first step is to create a pawsome profile, so that you can search for matches based on distance and availability.”

It can be argued that unlike Airbnb or Uber, BorrowMyDoggy does not facilitate any critical economic service such as providing livelihood or temporary housing or crucial transportation. Indeed, some may even argue that pet ownership is an elitist desire and pre-occupation. Yet, association with animals is something humans universally and across life situations crave; from homeless people busking in the streets with their canine friends to farmers rounding up sheep with their clever working dogs. The importance of pet ownership in wellbeing is well evidenced but perhaps that is a discussion for another day as it may serve as a distraction for the purposes of this paper. For us, the more important question to engage with is how BorrowMyDoggy.com provides a different model for peer to peer collaborative relationships than Airbnb or Uber which may have potential for other sharing economy relations.

A number of approaches can be identified in the BorrowMyDoggy.com model to avoid the two problems identified above: the profit accumulation problem and the regulation related replacement problem. First, the profit accumulation problem does not exist between the direct collaborators as there is no exchange of money between them. Arguably, the website and its associated company are in this venture as a business model with a profit making motive but this motive does not percolate to individual borrowers and owners. Not having a direct exchange of money avoids Simmel’s ‘commodification of social interactions’ and in his words it is an exchange as it is ‘the purest and most concentrated form of all human interactions in which serious interests are at stake.’ (1971:43). Between borrower and owner there exists a real exchange. Both borrowers and owners of dogs join the organization out of affective reasons and shared love of dogs although some owners may be in need of

immediate help with their dog. Borrowmydog is like most other online platforms which are not user generated but maintained by a third party for the consumption by users. Money is paid to the organization for maintaining the website and also for certain membership benefits. Both owners and borrowers pay a subscription fee to the company but they do not pay each other anything directly for borrowing or lending the dog. Further, the fee to the company is not per transaction but an annual fee. Again, this reduces a profit incentive and promotes a membership service model. There is direct influence of a different ethic in how the company practices its business. For example I was called by the company's customer service agents and sent details by email of potential borrowers located near me a few months into joining BorrowMyDoggy when they looked at my profile and wondered if I was not finding enough borrowers during the hours of my availability. Most owners look for evening offers of walks, whereas I was keen for someone to come play with my dog during the day. It is not as if more borrowings would generate more revenue for the company, but the call was a gesture of goodwill.

What then is the role of the company website? The key to understanding the need for a level 3 structure in peer to peer collaborations is the role of the organization. Simmel emphasises law is an underlying guarantee for exchanges to take place. Certainly part of the organizational role is to provide such a legal guarantee for the exchange. The website has consent forms such as for off lead walking of dogs and documents for recording care needs of the dogs. There are also pledges of caring for the dog and responsible ownership which all users of the website consent to while using the interface. The website also works at eliminating barriers to trust. The two major risks that borrowers and owners are likely to encounter when they borrow or lend a pet are of the pet needing medical assistance or causing damage to third party property. The BorrowMyDoggy fee serves to provide access to 24 hour vet services and pet insurance for third party liability so that both these risks are

controlled in a manner that engenders greater trust between the interacting strangers. This is an example of a mid-range regulatory structure which understands peer to peer collaborators better than remotely located state regulators (Morison 2010).

Between strangers brought together by a website the fee also acts as a symbol of real commitment. For example, borrowers who pay a fee are clearly borrowing dogs for companionship rather than earning a livelihood by walking dogs. The website advertises this prominently to reassure owners, “Our aim is to leave ‘Pawprints of Happiness’ on the lives of dogs and people by building local communities where dog lovers help out simply because they love dogs, not to get paid.” The website has a verification process prior to listing profiles which, while being limited in nature, also bolsters trust. All of these measures address the first problem of profit accumulation but it is important to highlight that the regulatory-replacement problem propelled by profit seeking is not tackled by any structure utilised by the website. However, the regulatory-replacement problem does not partly arise for structural reasons in the BorrowMyDoggy case. The availability of borrowers and what they offer to do is casual rather than full time hence this service is unlikely to replace regular dog walking services or regular dog sitting which are required by many dog owners. Taken together, these features consolidate interactions generated by the BorrowMyDoggy website into genuine examples of exchange.

Cultural Citizenship through Sharing

The motivation for a genuine exchange has to be a real and tangible one (Lie, 1992). A motivation that connects to a purpose larger than one connecting the original two interacting parties may serve the community. In BorrowMyDoggy while the immediate purpose maybe is to get a dog walker or to get a dog for a walk, the peer to peer interaction involves a large degree of public spiritedness, often extending beyond the individuals to the community at large. In most of my interactions with borrowers, the borrowers are migrants

and only rent a place and/or do not have close friends or relations in the UK. The website provides them an opportunity to establish a link that would be quite easy in their country of origin but is immensely difficult in a country they have migrated to or live in on a temporary basis.

Migrant or not, in peer to peer interactions, the state is decentred from social relations and the community fills in the role of both market and state. Citizenship in this instance is about stronger community ties and this constitutes a less state centric form of citizenship. The BorrowMyDoggy interactions engender belonging particularly to a specific neighbourhood or city. The dogs are local within local geographical space (parks, streets and pubs) therefore the subscribers form closer ties within the local community. Attachment to the local community is closer to the original meaning of citizen as one who resides in a city (cité-seyn, cité/sein/zein). Citizenship only later became linked to the nation state and nationality so community links in cities are closer to ancient citizenship. In modern days this can also be conceptually linked to a right to the city (Purcell 2003). The other dimension of citizenship triggered by BorrowMyDoggy exchanges is that of cultural citizenship. Uricchio (2004) has already explored the connection between peer to peer interactions and cultural citizenship. He identifies two components of cultural citizenship both of which it shares in common with peer to peer engagements. Cultural citizenship as well as peer to peer relationships depend on participatory culture and do not necessarily involve the state. According to Uricchio cultural citizenship is diametrically opposed to political citizenship which revolves around the state. However, this is true only to a limited extent as cultural citizenship does not necessarily contradict political citizenship (Burgess et al 2006). I would submit it merely extends its reach because, mostly in response to feminist critiques about the public sphere, political citizenship has now become more inclusive. The Habermasian public sphere looks at a range of public discourse on citizenship such as in media, in public spaces, and even in popular

culture (Bamforth 2012). Thus, political citizenship is not as state centric as it was prior to the powerful feminist critique.

The components of cultural citizenship that Uricchio identifies, active participation and exclusion of the state, present dilemmas for citizenship. Active participation has a troubled history in citizenship studies as it was a critique initially forwarded by those in the Right towards Marshallian social rights (Turner 2001; Marshall 1950; Andersen 1996). The critique presented by the Right was that social rights would encourage dependency on the state and encourage passivity amongst people. Instead they called for people to actively participate in order to engage citizenship rights (Kymlicka and Norman 1994). Active citizenship triggered by participation presumes that the capacity of people to participate in society is equal but this is not true for many such as the disabled, the aged, the unemployed, and the recently arrived migrant. Sparke finds that those who are marginal in society are further marginalised by the requirements of active engagement (2006). Those who are Left or Progressive in political orientation would support social rights to enhance the ability to participate. However, there are many on the Left who also critique passive entitlement, especially dependency on state led initiatives. Democratic initiatives require participation while social movements thrive on active engagement of a large number of people. Thus participation and active engagement have more than one complexion relevant for understanding citizenship. Marshall himself however failed to include in his account of rights the cultural practices which people can adopt themselves to strengthen their communities.

In peer to peer interactions as well as in cultural citizenship the social interactions are not compelled as a condition of gaining or retaining citizenship. Active engagement within communities is not top down but is bottom-up. Exclusion of the state is done usually in a bid to assert independence of members of a community and to remove the element of passivity and dependency without replicating neo-liberal ideas of a minimal state (Tussyadiah, 2015).

This assertion of independence is not the same as ‘self-interestedness’ (a trait often critiqued by communitarians) as the collaborators are still socially-embedded citizen. It is at odds however with the civic republican conception that people need to be active citizens beyond their localised communities in order to establish ‘good’ citizenship credentials (Hesselink 2011). In peer to peer collaborations the participatory turn of cultural citizenship thus hinges on being choosers of one’s own destiny, engaging with others out of free will, and being driven by public spirited altruism in addition to any interests of the self (Lister 1997: 41, Gaventa 2002).

I mentioned earlier the reasons for my participation in the BorrowMyDoggy community. I neglected to explain at that time the enjoyment I receive from the various purposes my pet serves in the lives of the borrowers. I have had the pleasure of knowing Alex and Aileen really well since that first meeting. Both of them take Jazz out for walks as they find it depressing to exercise in their little flat and having a dog to take out motivates them to exercise outdoors. Another borrower is Angharad, a 20 year old young Welsh woman who had recently dropped out of a History degree in a University and is now looking for shift work to make some savings while she made alternate plans. It is emotionally difficult for her to accept that she is neither in education nor in employment but she forgets her worries of having let down her mother when she plays with Jazz. She flops down on the floor besides Jazz every time she comes to visit and both of them make contented sounds. Angharad now has an extra set of my house keys and an invitation to stay whenever I am not in town. Kirstine, who grew up in Lancaster, and now lives a few blocks away from me wants to work as a guide dogs trainer. She has been a volunteer at numerous animal shelters and vet surgeries all her life, is a committed vegan, and tries to teach Jazz tricks. She is always ready for a laugh and enjoys my home cooked food. I am contented when people feel relieved from stress by using my dog therapeutically or when he makes them laugh. The difference he

makes to others contributes to their as well as my wellbeing. Meredyth and Minson (2001: xi) write that there is a clash between the public spirited citizen and the self-interested consumer but in my dog lending experience it is difficult for me to demarcate altruism from self-interest. I would argue that the close alignment of these two motivations makes the exchange tick. The argument resonates with the findings of Hamari et al (2015) on motivations for peer to peer collaborators. The BorrowMyDoggy model is attractive not just in the strategies to engender trust through mid-range regulation and in avoiding a direct profit motivation but also in the larger motivations for engaging in collaborations.

Conclusion

Studies of Airbnb and Uber seem to indicate that in several collaborative consumption arrangements the profit generating/rent seeking behaviour essentially is not about sharing but about adding more economic value to one's available time or unused goods (Fremstad 2014). Not surprisingly then, at least for some, there comes a point when bending or ignoring regulatory frameworks increases value at the cost of others. Such exchange, mostly facilitated through money changing hands, becomes the unbridled profit-seeking behaviour rather than a genuine practice of sharing (Macneil 1986). Peer-to-peer interactions in such scenarios merely removes the state as the over-seer of the market. Some start-ups have recognized the problems (or have been forced to acknowledge there are problems) and tried to address these inequalities in power. Some have even worked with local or central regulators from initial stages to avoid such issues rather than ploughing ahead and creating regulatory problems. Despite some changes it is evident that many 'new' economic practices are not that radically 'new' apart from utilising new apps to connect more people directly to each other. Money remains the focus of most interactions, and arguably this is a source of tension in 'exchanges' which are meant to shift the paradigms of capitalist transactions.

By contrast, in the BorrowMyDoggy case study people develop greater connections in their neighbourhoods and communities rather than chasing profits. It is, of course not perfect as like other uses of technology it is a model more readily accessible to younger and educated people with a certain degree of access to economic resources. However, it is an example of collaborative consumption which does not just de-center the state and then emulate neoliberal practices of privileging the market. It demonstrates that real sharing supports belonging and cultural citizenship; real sharing supports wellbeing and sustainable relationships. The lesson for other peer to peer collaborations is that the process of consumption when it connects people via a genuine shared emotion such as love of animals, or commitment to a sustainable environment, or ability of communities to sustain themselves in times of recession, has potential for creating greater engagement of individuals in communities.

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